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Progress report on the implementation process of the education for all objectives

Report of the Secretary-General and of the Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

The present report has been prepared pursuant to General Assembly resolution 50/143 of 21 December 1995. As requested by the Assembly, the report includes the conclusions and recommendations of the mid-decade meeting of the International Consultative Forum on Education for All, held at Amman from 16 to 19 June 1996 (see annex).

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PROGRESS REPORT ON THE IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS OF THE EDUCATION FOR ALL OBJECTIVES

Report of the Secretary-General and of the Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Introduction

"Education is empowerment. It is the key to establishing and reinforcing democracy, to development which is both sustainable and humane and to peace founded upon mutual respect and social justice. Indeed, in a world in which creativity and knowledge play an ever greater role, the right to education is nothing less that the right to participate in the life of the modern world."

1. This opening paragraph of the Amman Affirmation, the final communiqué of the mid-decade meeting of the International Consultative Forum on Education for All, adopted at Amman on 19 June 1996, emphasizes why education for all has become a major concern shared by countries around the world and a priority for the United Nations, its specialized agencies and their partners.

2. The Amman meeting was the third global meeting of the Education for All Forum since it was established, to follow up the World Conference on Education for All: Meeting Basic Learning Needs, held in Jomtien, Thailand from 5 to 9 March 1990. The Jomtien Conference, a major event during the International Literacy Year, adopted the World Declaration on Education for All and approved a Framework for Action to Meet Basic Learning Needs.[1] These two texts have guided countries and the international community in their efforts through the 1990s to expand and improve basic education which covers a range of activities that aim to meet the basic learning needs of individuals. The Education for All Forum secretariat is based at the headquarters of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in Paris. Its programme is defined by an international steering committee, and its operational funding is provided by a consortium of multilateral and bilateral organizations.

3. During 1995 and 1996, the Education for All Forum coordinated the mid-decade review of progress towards education for all, a worldwide exercise that called upon all countries to examine and report on their achievements and shortfalls in relation to their own education for all goals and plans. The global review also drew information from the annual statistical reports submitted to UNESCO, some 20 country case studies, a survey of the conditions of schools in a cross-section of the least developed countries, a survey of the major donor organizations and reports submitted by major groupings of non-governmental organizations concerned with basic education.

4. Information collected during the mid-decade review gave a general but incomplete picture of progress and shortfalls in the development of basic education since the Jomtien Conference. The present report contains a few selected, salient points from the findings of the review expressed in general terms, which do not take account of inter- and intra-country disparities and

exceptions. The Amman Affirmation, which includes more information and summarizes the Forum's conclusions and recommendations, is annexed to the present report.

Progress in the 1990s

5. Both the number and the proportion of literate adults continued to grow during the first half of the current decade, so that by 1995 they constituted 77 per cent of the adult population 15 years of age and older. The proportion of women who are literate increased slightly, from 68.7 per cent in 1990 to 71.2 per cent in 1995. During the same period, the absolute number of illiterate adults stayed at about 885 million, but within that total, the number of illiterate women grew by 4 million, so there are now nearly two illiterate women for every illiterate man in the world.

6. Gains in the expansion of primary schooling give the grounds for expecting a continuing growth in the number and proportion of literate adults. All of the major developing regions of the world registered significant increases in primary school enrolments, with the combined total reaching some 545 million in 1995, representing an increase of nearly 50 million in five years, double the pace of expansion during the 1980s. Since enrolment rates increased faster than population growth, the net enrolment ratios continued to rise in all developing regions. Some four out of five children in the 6 to 11 age-group were enrolled in school by mid-decade, and the absolute number of children in this age-group who were not enrolled is estimated to have dropped from 128 million in 1990 to 110 million in 1995.

7. Several other promising signs for the future emerged from the mid-decade review of the education for all. Most developing countries reported having taken steps since 1990 to give more priority to the expansion and improvement of the provision of basic education, that includes the quality of primary education, reducing urban-rural and gender disparities, and reducing drop-out rates. There appears also to have been some expansion of early childhood development programmes, which are estimated to reach some 450 million children in the developing regions, or about one out of five children in the three to six age-group.

Shortfalls, new and continuing challenges

8. The progress towards the education for all goals was found to be uneven both within and between countries, as well as in respect to the several target dimensions identified in the Framework for Action to Meet Basic Learning Needs, which was adopted by the Jomtien Conference and continues to serve as the main reference instrument for the international community. The Amman Forum has reiterated the stress given at the Jomtien Conference to closing the gender gap in education, but found that the progress towards this goal has been excruciatingly slow and, therefore, much more must be done in this area. The Forum also underlines that the expanded vision of basic education espoused at Jomtien has often been reduced to a simple emphasis upon putting more children into school: an essential step, but only one of many measures needed to achieve

education for all. In this connection, the Forum mentions the relative lack of attention and resources given to out-of-school literacy and other basic education programmes for young people and adults, and notes that the early childhood care and development, while receiving increased attention, nonetheless remains seriously underdeveloped and undersupported in many countries.

9. In its general assessment of progress so far, the Consultative Forum has identified emerging and continuing challenges that countries need to respond to in their efforts to provide basic education for all. These are summarized succinctly in the Amman Affirmation, annexed to the present report. In its final session, the Forum stressed the need to accelerate progress towards the education for all and called on the Governments to set firm targets and timetables for achieving those targets.

Conclusion

10. The Secretary-General of the United Nations and the Director-General of UNESCO would like to assure that the commitment to education for all made by the international community at the beginning of the present decade is being vigorously pursued by the Governments around the world with the support of the organizations and agencies of the United Nations system and their partners. Among these partners are numerous non-governmental and other community organizations, research institutions, print and audio-visual media, private enterprises, as well as bilateral and multilateral development assistance programmes. This impressive mobilization of partners and the progress achieved so far are a strong encouragement for continuing and increasing efforts at all levels to ensure that the basic learning needs of people of all ages and in all countries are effectively met. The Amman Forum, at its mid-decade meeting, has reaffirmed the necessity and the possibility of achieving the education for all. It is now up to the Member States, individually and collectively, to see this historical commitment through to its fulfilment.

Notes

[1] See Final Report of the World Conference on Education for All: Meeting Basic Learning Needs, Jomtien, Thailand, 5-9 March 1990, Inter-Agency Commission for the World Conference on Education for All, New York, 1990.

Annex

[Original: Arabic, Chinese, English, French and Spanish]

The Amman Affirmation, adopted at the mid-decade meeting of the International Consultative Forum on Education for All, held at Amman, from 16 to 19 June 1996

Education is empowerment. It is the key to establishing and reinforcing democracy, to development which is both sustainable and humane and to peace founded upon mutual respect and social justice. Indeed, in a world in which creativity and knowledge play an ever greater role, the right to education is nothing less than the right to participate in the life of the modern world.

Aware of the power and potential of education, the international community committed itself at the World Conference on Education for All held in Jomtien, Thailand, in March 1990, to meet the basic learning needs of every individual. In major conferences since Jomtien, the nations of the world have repeatedly endorsed the central importance of basic education in all aspects of the development process: preserving the environment, managing population growth, combating poverty, promoting social development and creating equality between the sexes. We have now met in Amman, Jordan, at the gracious invitation of His Majesty King Hussein Bin Talal, to review progress towards the goals set in Jomtien and, of even greater importance, to find ways of overcoming persistent problems and confronting new challenges in order to achieve education for all.

Gains achieved

In the six years since the adoption of the World Declaration on Education for All, there has been significant progress in basic education, not in all countries nor as much as had been hoped, but progress that is nonetheless real. Primary school enrolment has increased, an estimated 50 million more children are enrolled today than in 1990. The number of out-of-school children, which had grown inexorably for decades, is also beginning to decline. There are today 20 million fewer out-of-school children of primary-school age than at the start of the decade. This progress is the result of concerted efforts by Governments and peoples to extend educational opportunities. New partnerships have emerged, new resources have been tapped and new energies and ideas have been devoted to making education for all a reality.

Accompanying these quantitative gains has been a growing emphasis on the quality of education. Without educational content relevant to current needs, without preparation in the learning skills and new knowledge required for the future, and without efforts to improve learning achievement, access may neither serve the purposes intended nor provide the benefits expected. Fortunately, serious reflection, more rigorous planning and a spirit of innovation have prepared the ground in many countries for important educational advances in the years ahead.

We acknowledge the forces of progress at work in all parts of the world: the new dynamism with which Africa is struggling, in difficult circumstances, to reverse the negative trends of the last 10 years; the valiant efforts of South Asia to bring basic education to hundreds of millions of people; the increasing political support being given to education for all in the Arab States, which is increasingly perceived as the best preparation for meeting the challenges and uncertainties of the future; and the measures taken in other regions of the world to protect, sustain and enhance the gains that have been made since the Jomtien Conference.

Shortfalls

Yet, if the achievements of the last six years give reason for optimism, they provide no room for complacency. Continued progress requires even more forceful and concerted action, based on good information, sound research and careful analysis and aimed at achieving clearly specified results.

No point was more stressed in Jomtien than the urgent need to close the gender gap in education, both as a matter of simple equity and as the most effective means for responding to demographic pressures and promoting development. Yet, progress towards this goal has been excruciatingly slow; much more must be done.

The expanded vision of basic education espoused in Jomtien has often been reduced to a simple emphasis upon putting more children into school: an essential step, but only one of many measures needed to achieve education for all.

Early childhood care and development, with its enormous potential and distinctive role in promoting the active learning capacities and the overall well-being and development of children, while receiving greatly increased attention, nonetheless remains seriously underdeveloped and undersupported in many countries.

This lack of support applies as well to out-of-school literacy and education programmes for adolescents and adults. There are some 900 million adult illiterates in the world, nearly two thirds of them women. In all societies, the best predictor of the learning achievement of children is the education and literacy level of their parents. Investments in adult education and literacy are, thus, investments in the education of entire families.

There has also been a tendency to focus on basic education without recognizing its essential links to secondary and higher education, as well as to teacher training and the development of technical and vocational skills. The World Declaration on Education for All was intended to empower, not to limit - to propose minimums, but not to set ceilings.

The road ahead

As we look to the end of the century and beyond, the leadership in each country must assume the responsibility for accelerating progress towards education for all, setting firm targets and timetables for achieving them.

International agencies and donors must also play their full role as partners in the education for all movement, matching national efforts with significantly increased international support, improved coordination and greater responsiveness to country priorities.

All education for all partners must learn how to mobilize new resources as well as how to use existing resources more effectively. In the quest for education for all, enhanced political will, greater financial and material resources and improved management are all essential.

Emerging challenges

In the light of the developments of the past six years, it has become essential to re-examine goals and add new areas and means of action to those set forth in the Jomtien vision:

- Given the trend towards more open societies and global economies, we must emphasize the forms of learning and critical thinking that enable individuals to understand changing environments, create new knowledge and shape their own destinies. We must respond to new challenges by promoting learning in all aspects of life, through all the institutions of society, in effect, creating environments in which living is learning.

- Given the growing recognition and reality of multicultural and diverse societies, we must respond by including local content as well as cross-cultural learning in basic education and by acknowledging the essential role of the mother tongue for initial instruction.

- Given escalating violence caused by growing ethnic tensions and other sources of conflict, we must respond by ensuring that education reinforces mutual respect, social cohesion and democratic governance; we must learn how to use education to prevent conflict and, where crises do occur, ensure that education is among the first responses, thereby contributing to hope, stability and the healing of the wounds of conflict.

- Given debt burdens, restrictions on social expenditures and continuing wasteful expenditure on weapons of war, we must respond with measures to reduce debt burdens, including the transformation of liabilities into assets through debt swaps, policies that promote investments in a nation's people and future, and reforms to the international economic system that give poor countries a chance to earn their way in the world.

- Given rapidly growing numbers of youth at risk, often alienated from society and facing unemployment, we must seek ways to make education more responsive, both to the immediate realities facing these youth, as well as to the changing realities of a world in which basic learning skills are ever more important.

Continuing challenges

Even as we focus our attention on these new realities and challenges, we must persist in our efforts to meet the goals set forth in the World Declaration on Education for All:

- The priority of priorities must continue to be the education of women and girls. Successful approaches and programmes must be identified in order that they may be replicated and expanded. There can be no enduring success in basic education until the gender gap is closed.

- The training, status and motivation of teachers continues to be at the very core of educational concerns. While we must make better and wider use of technology and media, they can complement, but never replace the essential role of the teacher as the organizer of the instructional process and as a guide and example to the young.

- The full vision of education for all, that of a learning society, recognizes the role of parents, families and communities as the child's first teachers. Both learning and teaching begin at birth and continue throughout life, as individuals work, live and communicate ideas and values by word and example.

- Education for all can only be achieved through a broad partnership united by a shared purpose. It is essential to sustain the spirit of partnership and to broaden it to include all elements of society: parliaments, religious bodies, voluntary and community groups, the business sector, the media and others. Education for all was founded on a faith in partnerships and a belief that, in a shrinking world, we are destined to share fully in the successes as well as the setbacks of other peoples and countries. In the quest to achieve education for all, it is essential that we sustain and enhance this spirit of solidarity.

- The efficient and effective use of resources continues to be essential to the progress of education for all. We must seek more efficient management of education systems, make more effective use of partnerships, draw more systematically upon research and experimentation, and develop reliable information and assessment systems.

- The right to education has been powerfully reaffirmed by the near-universal ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Yet, there are still over 100 million children without access to education. We must respond urgently with new approaches and strategies capable of bringing quality education within the reach of all, including the poor, the remote and those with special educational needs. This calls for a comprehensive effort tailored to the needs of specific populations and based upon the best available expertise and technology.

Renewing the pledge

Six years ago, at Jomtien, the international community agreed upon the necessity and the possibility of achieving education for all. Today, we, the participants in the mid-decade review of education for all, reflecting on the experience and knowledge gained during the intervening years, reaffirm that necessity and possibility and rededicate ourselves to the essential task of bringing the benefits of education to all.